



H-Gram 017: 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War

27 March 2018

This special edition H-gram is published in conjunction with Vietnam War Veterans Day, which is commemorated on 29 March.

Contents:

1. U.S. Navy Operations in Vietnam, January-March 1968

2. Rolling Thunder - A Short Overview

In a live television broadcast on 31 March 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson shocked the nation by announcing he would not run for reelection in the fall of 1968. His decision was partly motivated by his plummeting approval rating caused primarily by the momentous events that occurred in Vietnam in January-March of 1968; in particular, the surprise Tet Offensive by North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese Communist (Viet Cong) forces that attacked over 150 cities, government, and military installations in South Vietnam, as well as the protracted bloody fighting during the siege of Khe Sanh and the recapture of the city of Hue, resulting in the highest weekly U.S. casualties (over 500 KIA per week) during the entire war.

The Tet Offensive was actually a massive military defeat for the Vietnamese Communists, and



"Seals on Ambush," painting, acrylic on canvas, by Marbury Brown, 1967 (88-161-EU).

casualties among the Viet Cong were so high that they never really recovered as an effective fighting force, resulting in ever-greater involvement in South Vietnam by North Vietnamese Army regular forces for the duration of the conflict. Nevertheless, despite their staggering losses, the Tet Offensive was a psychological, propaganda, and strategic success for the Vietnamese Communists.

Although frustration with the course of the war was already mounting among the American people and politicians, the prevailing attitude before the Tet Offensive, was "either do what it takes to win this quickly, or get out." After the offensive, the attitude

became increasingly, "just get out." Recognizing even before the Tet Offensive that popular support for the war effort was starting to wane, the Johnson administration and senior U.S. commanders in Vietnam had embarked on an extensive "success offensive," using all manner of metrics (e.g., kill-ratios, body counts, villages "pacified," etc.) to show that the United States was winning the war in Vietnam, and that victory was near. The Commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, even publically stated that the enemy was incapable of mounting a major offensive. And then they did. What the metrics failed to show was the will of the enemy to fight on despite its grievous losses. What the American people then saw was a war with high casualties and no end in sight, and public and political support rapidly diminished.

During President Johnson's broadcast, he also announced that negotiations between the United States, South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and the Viet Cong would commence in May 1968, and that the United States would cease bombing in North Vietnam (Operation Rolling Thunder) north of the 19th parallel (although not announced in the broadcast, bombing would continue between the 17th parallel (border between North and South Vietnam) and the 19th parallel) and along the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" supply route through Laos and Cambodia, and that Operation Sea Dragon. Additionally, U.S. naval bombardment of targets along the coast of North Vietnam would also cease north of the 19th parallel. Over the next months, the negotiators would argue mostly about the shape of the negotiating table, and American strategy would shift to "Vietnamization" (i.e., shifting the burden of fighting increasingly to the South Vietnamese Army, an "exit strategy" that was ultimately doomed.

Lost in what was the political and strategic debacle of the first months of 1968 in Vietnam was the fact that the U.S. Navy accomplished its assigned missions with extraordinary effectiveness, including playing a key role in preventing major cities in the Mekong River Delta of South Vietnam from falling to the Viet Cong during the Tet Offensive, continuing to strike numerous targets in North Vietnam despite increasingly lethal air defenses, providing extensive air strike and airborne intelligence support to the

U.S. Marines holding out in Khe Sanh, preventing a North Vietnamese supply infiltration surge into South Vietnam via the sea, destroying numerous resupply vehicles and vessels, and killing large numbers of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong Troops. What the U.S. Navy failed to do, along with the rest of the U.S. military, was to break the will of the Vietnamese Communists to fight.

Whether the strategies and tactics advocated by U.S. military commanders responsible for conducting the war in Vietnam would have resulted in victory is still debatable. What is not really debatable is that political restrictions and micromanagement from Washington, DC, greatly complicated military efforts, were frequently counterproductive and, in some cases, cost lives unnecessarily. To be fair, the Johnson administration was deeply concerned about a Soviet attack in Western Europe or Chinese intervention in the Vietnam War (as the Chinese had in Korea), which significantly affected the forces that could be committed to the war in Vietnam, as well as how those forces could be used. Nevertheless, concepts in vogue at the time such as "flexible response" and "graduated escalation" may have sounded good in political science class (and to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, also a casualty of Tet, who resigned on 28 February 1968), but they also allowed the enemy time to adapt and counter U.S. escalatory measures, and they represent a case study in how not to win a war.

For more on U.S. Navy operations in Vietnam in January-March 1968 period, please see attachment H-017-1; however, it may be useful to read first attachment H-017-2, "Rolling Thunder—A Short Overview." I also highly recommend RADM (Ret.) Jerry "Bear" Taylor's daily "Rolling Thunder Remembered" blog. With over 200 combat missions over Vietnam, Bear speaks with a perspective I cannot match.

Sources for this H-gram include, NHHC publications: *War in the Shallows: U.S. Navy Coastal and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam 1965-1968* by Dr. John Sherwood; *Naval Air War: The Rolling Thunder Campaign* by Norman Polmar and Edward J. Marolda; *Knowing the Enemy: Naval Intelligence in Southeast Asia* by Richard a. Mobley and Edward J.

Marolda; and other publications from the NHHHC series, "The U.S. Navy and the Vietnam War." Other sources consulted include: Flying Warrior: My Life as a Naval Aviator During the Vietnam War by Jules Harper, and History of the U.S. Navy, Volume Two, 1942-1991 by my Naval Academy advisor, Dr. Robert W. Love Jr.

The recently completed NHHHC nine-volume series "The U.S. Navy and the Vietnam War" is available on the NHHHC publications webpage [<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/publications-by-subject.html#vietnam>] and includes:

1. The Approaching Storm: Conflict in Asia, 1945-1965
2. Nixon's Trident: Naval Power in Southeast Asia, 1968-1972
3. The Battle Behind Bars: Navy and Marine POWs in the Vietnam War
4. Navy Medicine in Vietnam: Passage to Freedom to the Fall of Saigon
5. Combat at Close Quarters: Warfare on the Rivers and Canals of Vietnam
6. Naval Air War: The Rolling Thunder Campaign
7. Knowing the Enemy: Naval Intelligence in Southeast Asia
8. Fourth Arm of Defense: Sealift and Maritime Logistics in the Vietnam War
9. End of the Saga: The Maritime Evacuation of South Vietnam and Cambodia



"Fire Fight": Painting, oil on masonite, by R. G. Smith, 1968 (88-160-EV).

H-017-1: U.S. Navy Operations in Vietnam, January – March 1968

H-Gram 017, Attachment 1

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

27 March 2018

On 21 January 1968, a force of well over 20,000 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops laid siege to the U.S. Marine combat base near the isolated village of Khe Sanh, located about seven miles from the Laotian border and about 15 miles south

of the "Demilitarized Zone" (DMZ) on the border between North and South Vietnam in the far northwest corner of South Vietnam. From then until the siege was finally lifted in April by a U.S. Army over-land operation, the 6,000 Marine defenders endured near constant rocket and artillery attacks, sometimes over 1,000 rounds per day, with a one-day peak of 1,307 on 23 February. Although the NVA force never launched an all-out assault, smaller-scale ground attacks and infiltration attempts were frequent. The only way to resupply the Marines was by air-drop or high-risk landings by C-130s and helicopters at the airfield.

The situation at Khe Sanh had a superficial similarity to the 1954 siege of Dien Bien Phu in

North Vietnam, then part of French Indochina, when a major French force was surrounded and forced to surrender to the Viet Minh. This subsequently resulted in Vietnam gaining its independence from France and then being split in two, North and South. The press and even high-ranking U.S. military played up the resemblance and, as a result, Khe Sanh became a “must win” for the United States. The NVA, on the other hand, could have easily bypassed it if they chose, which was pointed out by senior U.S. Marine commanders in Vietnam who questioned the wisdom of occupying and holding Khe Sanh. However, General Westmoreland believed that drawing the NVA into a set-piece battle in an isolated area, where the risk of civilian and collateral damage was minimal, would enable the full application of U.S. power to pin down and destroy what had been to that point a mostly elusive enemy (i.e., a “Dien Bien Phu in reverse”). In addition, President Johnson had ordered that Khe Sanh must not be allowed to fall. So, the Marines were stuck, defending an otherwise insignificant piece of ground against an enemy whose rockets outranged the Marines’ artillery. The result was the one of the largest and most intense air-to-ground bombardments in history. Over the next several months, U.S. Air Force, Marine, and Navy aircraft would drop more bombs around Khe Sanh in “Operation Niagara” than had been dropped in the entire Korean War or against Japan in 1945.

At the time of the NVA attack on Khe Sanh, U.S. Navy aircraft launching from aircraft carriers on “Yankee Station” in the Gulf of Tonkin were flying daily strikes—weather permitting—on targets in North Vietnam as part of Operation Rolling Thunder, ongoing since 1965. The Navy suffered increasing losses throughout 1967 as North Vietnam’s new surface-to-air missile and radar network and increasingly dense anti-aircraft artillery coverage became more effective—thanks to Soviet and Chinese equipment brought into North Vietnamese ports, where the U.S. rules of engagement prohibited U.S. strikes. (See H-017-3

for more on the Navy’s participation in Rolling Thunder. Note, too, that about 61 U.S. Navy air wing commanders, squadron commanders, and executive officers were lost during the course of the Vietnam War, a significant loss to naval aviation leadership at the time.)

Normally, three carriers were assigned to Rolling Thunder: two on Yankee Station, each covering a 12-hour period of flight operations, and a third undergoing replenishment and some R&R, usually at Subic Bay in the Philippines. (Until 1966, a carrier also operated on “Dixie Station” off South Vietnam to provide close-air support to U.S. Army and Marine forces in the South while the Air Force built up its base structure in Thailand and in South Vietnam. The area had been subject to Viet Cong mortar and rocket attacks.) During the siege of Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive, sometimes four and even five carriers operated from Yankee Station, including USS *Ticonderoga*, USS *Ranger*, USS *Kitty Hawk*, USS *Coral Sea*, and later USS *Enterprise* (after concluding response to the seizure of the intelligence collection ship USS *Pueblo* by North Korea. *Ticonderoga* and *Ranger* were also drawn off Yankee Station briefly in reaction to the *Pueblo* capture.) The carrier force operating in support of Rolling Thunder was designated Task Force 77 and was under the operational control of the U.S. Seventh Fleet.

During the northeast monsoon season, which resulted in heavy cloud cover North Vietnam, Navy aircraft from Yankee Station would fly close-support missions over South Vietnam, which was generally clear (the situation reversed during the southeast monsoon.) In January 1968, monsoon conditions prevailed over North Vietnam, so the Navy all-weather A-6 Intruders flew the great majority of strikes into North Vietnam. Other Navy carrier aircraft contributed to the defense of Khe Sanh with over 5,300 sorties delivering almost 8,000 tons of bombs. By comparison, the Air Force flew almost 9,700 sorties—but few into North Vietnam at that time—and Marine air flew over 7,000 sorties in support of Marines on the

ground. On a typical day, there would be 350 tactical aviation strike sorties from all services and 60 B-52 bomber strikes by the Air Force, sometimes within 100 yards of the Khe Sanh perimeter. The result was very high NVA casualties in the thousands and a major reason the NVA didn't mount a major ground assault on Khe Sanh, although it did deploy armor for the first time in the South in one assault on South Vietnamese forces in a nearby village. The air operations in the vicinity of Khe Sanh also renewed and exacerbated an inter-service fight over whether air operations should be commanded by a single commander (as the Air Force wanted) or remain under the command of their own service (as the Marines, Navy, and most of the Army wanted). In this case, General Westmoreland agreed with the Air Force, despite vociferous objections by the Marines in particular. This food fight continued all the way to Desert Storm and beyond.

Significant U.S. Navy contributions to the defense of Khe Sanh were acoustic/seismic sensors dropped by specially modified OP-2E Neptune aircraft of the Special Naval Observation Squadron, VO-67. Marine defenders at Khe Sanh credited the sensors dropped by the Neptunes for providing 40 percent of the actionable intelligence, enabling artillery fire and air strikes against NVA movements around Khe Sanh. For many years, VO-67's operations were kept secret and so are not mentioned in many accounts. VO-67 was a clandestine Navy squadron based in Thailand, flying P-2 Neptune ASW aircraft that had been modified to conduct armed ground-attack reconnaissance and delivery of seismic and acoustic intrusion detectors, which were based on ASW sonobuoy technology and could detect troop and vehicle (and elephant) movement on the ground. The program was "Muscle Shoals," which later became Operation Igloo White.

In January 1968, VO-67 was engaged in development and testing of the sensors, deploying them on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos,

which provided early warning of increased NVA reinforcement and supply activity before the attack on Khe Sanh and the Tet Offensive. Once the attack on Khe Sanh commenced, the VO-67 aircraft were immediately pressed into full operational service, delivering 316 sensors around Khe Sanh in the first month commencing on 22 January. Accurate sensor placement required a low altitude delivery, making the planes easy targets. Over the course of the next year, three OP-2E aircraft would be shot down with the loss of 20 aircrewmen. One of the lost aircraft was piloted by CDR Paul Milius, who remained at the controls of the aircraft until his crew successfully bailed out (one was mortally wounded when the plane was hit, but the seven who bailed out were rescued.) Milius then bailed out but was never seen again, and his body has never been recovered. Milius was promoted to captain while missing in action and awarded the Navy Cross. The Burke-class destroyer USS *Milius* (DDG-69) is named in his honor. The secret squadron would be awarded a Presidential Unit Citation in 2008.

Another significant Navy contribution to the defense of Khe Sanh was the role of Task Force (TF) Clearwater on the Cua Viet and Perfume Rivers in northern South Vietnam. Although all the supplies to the Marines at Khe Sanh were airlifted (or dropped) in, the vast majority of those supplies were first shipped up the Cua Viet River by landing craft and other small vessels to a staging area, where they were loaded aboard aircraft. Armored monitors and other vessels of TF Clearwater successfully defended the transport of supplies on the river from Viet Cong ambushes. During the Tet Offensive, fighting along the river was at times intense. The commander of U.S. Naval Forces in Vietnam, Rear Admiral Kenneth Veth, initially resisted allocating forces for TF Clearwater because they would come at the expense of forces operating in the critical Mekong delta, but he was convinced by intelligence reports of the NVA build-up (many provided by U.S. Navy reconnaissance aircraft flying in

southern North Vietnam), and he detached some of his forces from the delta, including a Seabee Battalion. The establishment and arrival of Task Force Clearwater proved to be “just in time.”

In the end, the Marines at Khe Sanh held, at a cost of 274 dead (the U.S. Army also suffered numerous casualties during Operation Pegasus, the relief force that broke the siege). General Westmoreland, commander of all U.S. forces in Vietnam, was so fixated on the defense of Khe Sanh that he initially believed the subsequent Tet Offensive was actually a diversion for a major attack on Khe Sanh. The reality was almost certainly the exact opposite. With the arrival of U.S. Army reinforcements in April, the NVA temporarily withdrew, and the U.S. claimed victory. In July, the last Marines withdrew from Khe Sanh, destroying all the facilities, and the North Vietnamese then claimed victory. USS *Peleliu* (LHA-5), commissioned in 1980 and decommissioned in 2015, was originally to be named USS *Khe Sanh* (and then USS *Da Nang*) before the name “*Peleliu*” (a World War II battle) was agreed upon.

The Tet Offensive

The Tet Offensive, which commenced on 30 January 1968 with near-simultaneous attacks on over 150 South Vietnamese targets, was arguably the turning point of the Vietnam War. It was a devastating military defeat for the NVA and especially the Viet Cong. Casualty estimates are pretty unreliable but may have been as high as 45,000–58,000 killed including the “mini-Tets” that occurred over the next eight months. Much to the surprise of the North Vietnamese (who thought they had been soundly defeated) and to the consternation of U.S. military commanders (who thought they had won a decisive victory), the Tet Offensive turned out to be a massive psychological, propaganda, and strategic win for North Vietnam (but not so much for the Viet Cong, who never really recovered). Although the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) had acquitted itself pretty well (i.e., no ARVN units broke, and few

soldiers defected), the outcome resulted in widespread demoralization—particularly in the South Vietnamese cities, which to that point had largely been spared from the fighting—and loss of faith in the ability of the South Vietnamese government, which was widely viewed as heavily corrupt, to protect the citizenry. What truly faltered was the will of the United States to continue to sustain the high casualties to carry on a war that now appeared to have no end in sight. Contrary to many accounts, the target of the Tet Offensive was not the political will of the United States; that outcome turned out to be an unanticipated bonus to the North Vietnamese. The real objective of the “General Offensive and Uprising of Tet Mau Than 1968” was to take the fight to South Vietnamese cities and provoke a general uprising by the people of South Vietnam against the South Vietnamese government. In this regard, the Tet Offensive failed, at least in the short run, although the damage it did to the South Vietnamese government would prove fatal in the long run.

Another misconception about the Tet Offensive regards intelligence and warning. Actually, there was considerable warning at the end of 1967 and beginning of 1968 that a major North Vietnamese and Viet Cong Offensive in the South was coming soon, a fair amount of it provided by U.S. Navy reconnaissance flights over southern North Vietnam that reported the increased southward flow of NVA personnel and supplies. However, as one South Vietnamese commander put it, even if the United States had access to the full North Vietnamese plan, they (the United States) wouldn’t have believed it. The United States had even captured a Viet Cong Op Order that basically laid out the entire plan. The reason the United States didn’t believe it was because the U.S. analysis of the warning indicators was focused on enemy probable courses of action based on capability rather than enemy intentions. U.S. commanders and intelligence analysts did not believe that the NVA and Viet Cong had the forces necessary to execute successfully such a massive, simultaneous

offensive. For that matter, neither did much of the leadership of North Vietnam, which was deeply divided on the wisdom of conducting such an offensive. The Tet Offensive was only approved after a purge of pro-negotiation/protracted guerilla war/political solution faction officials in the summer of 1967 (the "Revisionist Anti-Party Affair"), which left the hard-core militant anti-negotiation faction officials in the dominant position. The situation in North Vietnam was actually very dire, with a collapsing economy due to U.S. bombing and a need to do something different (negotiate or attack) to get out of the jam. U.S. commanders had lots of data and metrics about increasing NVA and Viet Cong activity; what they lacked was what Admiral Nimitz had at Midway—accurate intelligence about enemy intent (which Nimitz had believed). It turned out the North Vietnamese doubters, U.S. commanders, and intelligence analysts were correct. The Vietnamese communists lacked the forces to execute successfully such a massive offensive, and they were soundly thrashed with very high casualties within a few days (except in Hue City). Militarily, the Tet Offensive was a disaster for the North Vietnamese, and it was initially viewed as a failure by them.

Over the months preceding the Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese engaged in extensive operational deception designed to focus U.S. military attention to the border areas and away from the coastal cities. NVA operations at Con Tien, just south of the DMZ, and Dak To in the Central Highlands, made little military sense and cost the NVA heavily, but succeeded in the deception objective. While U.S. commanders viewed the operation at Kha Sanh as an attempt by North Vietnam to replicate its great victory against the French at Dien Bien Phu, the real objective was just to tie down a large number of U.S. forces and divert U.S. attention from the preparations for the countrywide Tet Offensive. In this objective, the North Vietnamese mostly succeeded. The North Vietnamese government also announced that it would honor a truce

between 27 January and 3 February in conjunction with Tet, the Vietnamese New Year holiday, something that it actually had no intention of doing. The South Vietnamese took the bait, and in some locations over half the ARVN troops were away from their post on holiday leave when the offensive commenced. Although several premature Viet Cong attacks the day before the offensive commenced resulted in a recall initiation, it was too late to get many ARVN troops back to their bases. President Johnson had also previously announced a unilateral Christmas truce and bombing pause, which the North Vietnamese used, as they usually did, to great effect for massive unmolested movement of troops and material and generally improving their defensive and, in this case, offensive posture. Of note, however, is that one of General Westmoreland's key commanders, General Frederick Weyand (who had served as an intelligence officer earlier in his career) had become suspicious of North Vietnamese intentions and convinced General Westmoreland on 10 January to pull back several brigades of U.S. troops from the Cambodian border to Saigon, an action that proved critical in quickly defeating the attacks directed against the South Vietnamese capital city.

The Tet Offensive commenced on the night of 30–31 January 1968 with attacks by about 84,000 NVA and VC troops against about 155 South Vietnamese cities, government, and military targets, including some U.S. targets such as the U.S. embassy in Saigon. Communist forces attacked 36 of the 44 provincial capitals in South Vietnam, and almost every military installation came under some form of mortar, rocket attack, or infantry assault. Despite the surprise, the attack on the U.S. embassy was quickly beaten back, as was a badly coordinated attack on the South Vietnamese Navy Headquarters in Saigon, partially thanks to a U.S. Navy advisor who alertly called in support from U.S. Military Police as firing began at the compound gate.

In almost all cases, the enemy attacks were beaten back in a matter of a day or two, with the exception of the old Vietnamese Imperial capital of Hue, where two NVA battalions succeeded in occupying the old citadel. ARVN and U.S. Marine forces would take until 25 February to recapture it, at a cost that included 216 Marines killed and 1,600 wounded. Other NVA forces also force-marched from the Khe Sanh area to the Hue area to help slow down the ARVN and U.S. Marine counterattack. The AEGIS-class cruiser USS *Hue City* (CG-66) would be named in honor of the U.S. Marines who fought and died in one of the longest and bloodiest battles of the entire war. It is the only U.S. Navy ship named after a Vietnam War battle. Besides casualties inflicted on ARVN forces and South Vietnamese civilians caught in the cross-fire, the North Vietnamese deliberately executed at least 2,800 South Vietnamese civilians (some estimates are even higher) in Hue—basically anyone who had some connection with the South Vietnamese government, as well as teachers, religious leaders, and a small number of European and American civilians were killed. A combination of poor weather, which impeded air support, and a desire to minimize the destruction of a historic and culturally significant site, contributed to the length of time it took to recapture the city. (The old city/citadel of Hue is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.)

As part of the Tet Offensive, Viet Cong forces attacked 13 of the 15 largest cities in the Mekong River Delta, the strategically vital “breadbasket” of South Vietnam. With almost no roads, only the labyrinth of rivers and canals provided the means for transportation. General Westmoreland would later credit U.S. Navy forces, particularly the joint Army-Navy Mobile Riverine force with “saving” the Delta. This may have been somewhat of an exaggeration, but there is no question that the Navy’s riverine forces played a critical role in the rapid movement of U.S. Army troops to quickly eject Viet Cong forces from every city they attempted to occupy. In several cases, U.S. Navy

SEALS, from five SEAL detachments transported by Navy riverine craft, drove off Viet Cong forces.

As noted above, U.S. naval forces in Vietnam were under the overall command of Rear Admiral Kenneth Veth at the time of the Tet Offensive,. Operating within the Mekong River Delta were two major task forces. Task Force 116, the River Patrol Force, consisted of 13 sections of 10 PBR boats each. (PBRs were small four-man patrol boats generally armed with .50-caliber and M60 7.62-mm machine guns and a 40-mm grenade launcher.) TF-116 was responsible for executing Operation Game Warden, the interdiction of Viet Cong movement and supply activity on the waterways of the Mekong Delta. The second task force, TF-117, was the Mobile Riverine Force (MRF), under the command of Commodore Robert Salzer, and consisting of over 100 armored watercraft of various types and sizes, manned by the U.S. Navy, but responsible for the rapid transport (and defense) of a brigade-sized U.S. Army force. The Navy riverine force was also supported by a Navy squadron of light attack helicopters, the “Seawolves” of HA(L)-3, flying modified Huey helicopter gunships. During the course of the war, the Navy riverine forces executing Operation Game Warden would lose about 200 men, but achieve a 40-to-1 kill ratio, amongst the best of any force in the war (for a metric that, as it turned out, didn’t mean much). The Seawolves would fly 120,000 combat sorties during the war at a cost of 44 personnel killed. The U.S. Navy forces in the Delta also provided significant training to the South Vietnamese navy, which eventually operated about 650 vessels of various types of their own. In the end, when South Vietnam fell in 1975, it was the U.S.-trained South Vietnamese navy forces in the Delta that held out the longest.

As part of the Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese attempted to surge supplies into South Vietnam via the sea using trawlers and other smaller inconspicuous-looking vessels. U.S. Navy ships operating as part of Operation Sea Dragon (the

bombardment of the North Vietnam coast) interdicted some of this traffic. Most of the seaborne traffic was interdicted by TF-115, the Coastal Surveillance Force, executing Operation Market Time. Market Time was a mostly U.S. Navy operation with significant U.S. Coast Guard participation using patrol aircraft and about 145 smaller vessels, such as PCF "Swift" boats, to track supply vessels as they went far into the South China Sea before making a run for the South Vietnamese coast to drop off supplies for the Viet Cong. As much as 90 percent of Communist seaborne resupply and infiltration was estimated to have been interdicted as a result of Market Time. U.S. Navy destroyers also conducted naval gunfire support to U.S. Marine and Army operations along the coastline during the Tet Offensive. (The reactivated battleship USS *New Jersey* would arrive later in 1968.) It should also be noted that U.S. allies, especially Australia, participated in many of the naval operations off the Vietnamese coast.

In the end, most of the NVA and Viet Cong forces that initiated the Tet Offensive were quickly driven off by ARVN and U.S. counterattacks. The battle of Hue, however, dragged on for several weeks, and the siege of Khe Sanh continued for several months. What the American public saw, however, was not a great victory but a steady stream of bloody young draftee American soldiers and Marines beamed directly into the comfort of their living rooms on their new color TVs. There are those who have argued that "the media" lost the war by prematurely declaring the Tet Offensive to be a Communist victory. However, a case can also be made that it was the loss of credibility by the U.S. government and senior military leadership that was the real root cause. For over a year, senior U.S. leaders had been telling the press that things were going great and according to plan when in reality they knew it wasn't. The Tet Offensive burst that bubble, resulting in what the media termed the "credibility gap." Once the U.S. military leadership had compromised its integrity, the media coverage turned increasingly skeptical

and even hostile. (This is actually a difficult dilemma because being publically truthful about things going badly arguably gives aid and comfort to the enemy and adversely affects morale amongst the troops and on the home front. The solution in previous wars had been censorship, which in the modern age is no longer effective.)

In a special CBS TV news broadcast on 27 February 1968, network anchor Walter Cronkite (deemed "the most trusted man in America") stated that victory in the war was no longer in sight, and what America was in for was a protracted stalemate. He implied that the metrics for success provided by the U.S. government could be no longer trusted. The week before Cronkite's broadcast, the United States had suffered 543 killed and 2,547 wounded (the peak for the war) and, over the course of the Tet Offensive, 1,526 killed and about 7,700 wounded. It was a price that the American public was increasingly unwilling to pay. President Johnson supposedly said that if he'd lost Cronkite, he'd lost Middle America. There is reason to believe LBJ didn't actually say that, but it was essentially true.



A USS Coral Sea (CVA-43) catapult officer signals launch and an A-4 Skyhawk starts down the flight deck, during operations in the South China Sea, 24 March 1965. The aircraft is being launched from the carrier's starboard catapult (USN 111691).

H-017-2: Rolling Thunder – A Short Overview

H-Gram 017, Attachment 2
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC
27 March 2018

On 2 March 1965, Operation Rolling Thunder missions commenced against North Vietnam. The goal of the operation was to discourage the Hanoi regime's direction and support of an insurgency that threatened to destroy the Republic of Vietnam. The campaign sought to strike targets sufficiently valuable to pressure the North Vietnamese into concessions, albeit in a limited

manner that would not result in too many civilian deaths, the destruction of the North Vietnamese regime, or a Soviet or Chinese intervention. Therefore, targets chosen tended to be interdiction targets, such as bridges and railway lines, plus ones connected with the industrial base and war economy, such as POL (petroleum, oil, lubricants), power plants, and weapons and ammunitions storage depots. Absent from the list were many air defense targets, which were either too close to heavily populated areas or, in the case of airfields, too provocative.

The Rolling Thunder campaign had five distinct phases:

In Phase I (March–June 1965), a variety of targets, including ammunition depots, radar sites, and barracks, were hit in an attempt to persuade North Vietnam to come to the negotiating table. It accomplished little other than hardening the resolve of the Communist regime and spurring the creation of one of the world's most sophisticated air defense networks.

Phase II (July 1965–January 1966) targeted roads, bridges, boats, and railroads. Phase III (January–October 1966) focused on POL resources. Phase IV (October 1966–May 1967) shifted the campaign to industrial facilities and power-generating plants. Significantly in Phase IV, U.S. warplanes struck targets in Hanoi for the first time, but these more aggressive tactics did not have much impact on the North Vietnamese leadership or its forces in South Vietnam. Overall, the air campaign only produced limited interdiction gains by early 1967, but had cost the United States greatly in the number of aircraft lost. A Department of Defense report released to the press on 9 January 1967 claimed a loss of 599 fixed-wing aircraft from all the services and 255 helicopters—a total of 854 aircraft.

Phase V (May 1967–October 1968) focused on what remained of North Vietnam's industrial infrastructure as well as "fleeting" targets of opportunity. In January 1968, however, the Tet offensive interrupted the campaign, compelling the Navy to shift air assets to close air support missions designed to defend major positions in South Vietnam. In Operation Niagara, Task Force 77 and other U.S. and South Vietnamese air forces deluged the enemy forces around Khe Sanh with a rain of bombs and rockets that decimated their ranks and eliminated any prospect of a successful ground assault on the base. Flying more than 3,000 attack sorties in support of the Khe Sanh defenders during February and March 1968, Yankee Station carrier aircraft strafed, rocketed, and bombed enemy positions, some as close as 100 yards to the U.S. base.

Militarily, the Tet Offensive proved disastrous for the Communists. Not only did the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces fail to hold onto any of the major towns or cities struck during the attack, but lost over 58,000 troops in the process. Nevertheless, Tet was a turning point in the war and a strategic victory for the enemy. Having heard only positive reports on the war from General William C. Westmoreland and other government officials during preceding months, many Americans, including President Johnson, now considered the war unwinnable. Believing that Rolling Thunder was doing little to weaken the will of the enemy to fight, President Johnson delivered a televised address to the American people on 31 March 1968 announcing a halt to bombing operations north of the 19th parallel, another offer to negotiate a cease-fire agreement with Hanoi, and his decision not to seek a second term in office. The North Vietnamese government agreed to talk and, later that year, met with American diplomatic officials in Paris, but it would take the United States close to four more years and a significant amount of fighting to achieve a settlement acceptable to both parties.

Halloween 1968 marked the end of Operation Rolling Thunder. During the three and a half-year aerial assault, Navy and Marine aircraft flew 152,399 attack sorties against North Vietnam, just short of the Air Force total of 153,784 attack sorties. These U.S. strikes dropped 864,000 tons of bombs and missiles on North Vietnam. This total compared with 653,000 tons of conventional bombs unleashed during the three years of the Korean War, and the 503,000 tons dropped in the Pacific theater during more than three years of World War II. All told, Navy pilots shot down 29 enemy aircraft during the Rolling Thunder period while losing just eight aircraft to MiGs. Experience battling MiGs and other air defenses gained during Rolling Thunder led to a variety of technological innovations in air-to-air missile technology, electronic warfare, and improved command, control, communications, and intelligence.

Six hundred Navy and 271 Marine aviators were lost during the war, most of them during Rolling Thunder. Most of the Navy prisoners of war (POWs) were shot down during Rolling Thunder missions, including Medal of Honor recipient James B. Stockdale and Senator John McCain. In total, the North Vietnamese and Chinese captured 170 naval aviators and aircrew, 160 of whom Hanoi released in 1973.